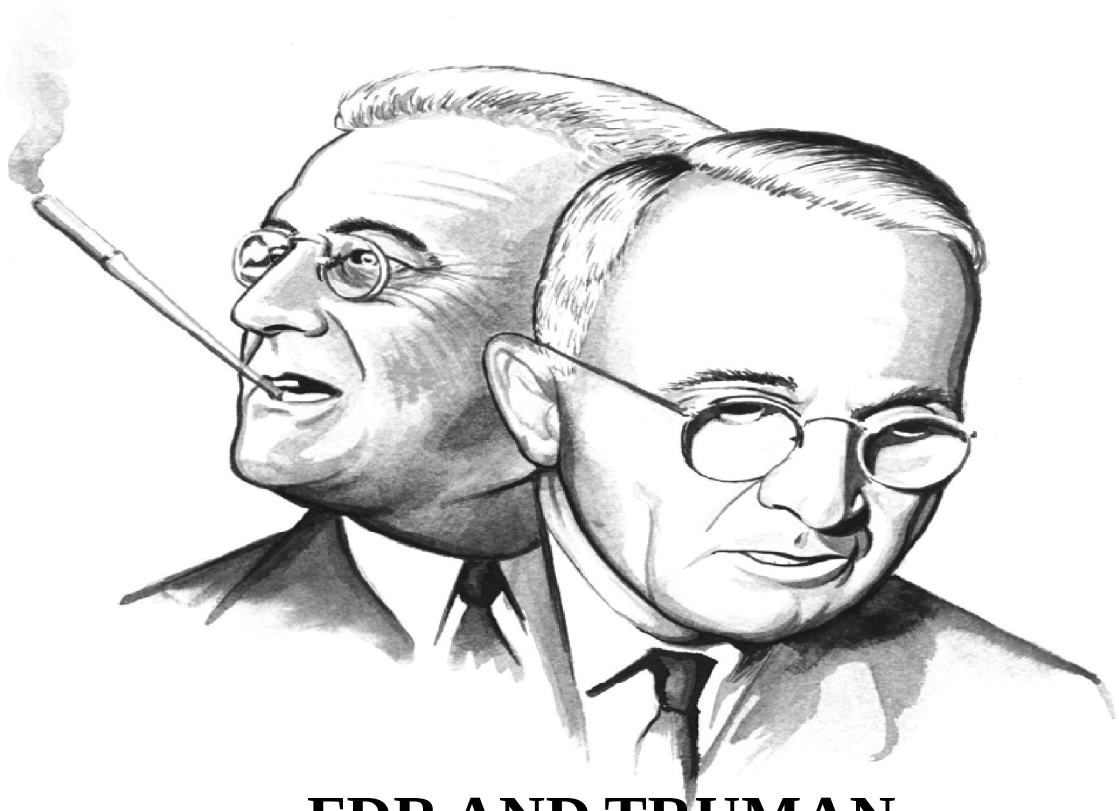


FDR AND TRUMAN

CONTINUITY AND CONTEXT IN THE A-BOMB DECISION

HERMAN S. WOLK AND RICHARD P. HALLION

THE 50TH anniversary of the American dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which forced the surrender of Japan and the end of World War II, has occasioned much comment, introspection, and controversy. The discussion and acrimony surrounding the National Air and Space Museum's exhibit of the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, heightened the controversy and intensified the spotlight on President Harry S Truman's decision to employ the atomic bomb against Japan.

Context has often been neglected in the enormous outpouring of commentary on the rationale behind Truman's decision. The two crucial contexts surrounding the Truman decision are the evolution of American strategic bombing policy and the situation in the Pacific war in the spring and summer of 1945 as seen by both Truman and the Japanese.

Perhaps the most important element to be remembered in the long evolution of strategic bombing policy is that strong continuity existed between the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. Long before the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), outraged at the savagery of the Japanese Imperial Army's onslaught in China and at Nazi Germany's offensive in Europe, had requested that the US Army Air Corps, headed by Maj Gen Henry H. ("Hap") Arnold, begin preparations to build a massive American air force. Roosevelt, a former assistant secretary of the Navy, astutely determined that airpower would constitute a decisive element in any forthcoming conflict between the Western democracies and totalitarianism. Long harboring a sympathetic view towards the suffering of the Chinese people at the hands of the Japanese military, FDR thought that in the event of war with Japan, it would be most important that the United States have the capability to strike the Japanese home islands and urban areas with long-range, land-based bomber aircraft.

The key to FDR's strategy rested on the success of the Very Long Range Project—the development of the B-29. Although some Army Air Forces (AAF) lead-

ers considered the B-29 a "three-billion-dollar gamble," General Arnold intensively pressed its development and production. This revolutionary aircraft, a great advance over the B-17 and B-24 long-range bombers, became Arnold's great obsession. With iron will, Arnold fired subordinates who failed to share his urgency, and he drove the big bomber through the developmental and production cycles.

General Arnold always viewed the B-29 as the only weapon with which the United States could "hope to exert pressure against Japan without long and costly preliminary operations."[1] After America entered World War II against Germany and Japan, Arnold determined that the B-29 should be used against Japan: "If B-29's are first employed against targets other than against Japan, the surprise element will be lost, and the Japs will take the necessary actions to neutralize potential useable bases."[2]

Both FDR and Truman emphasized very clearly to Marshall and Arnold that everything should be done to end the war with Japan as quickly as possible, with the least loss of American and Allied lives.

President Roosevelt and Gen George C. Marshall, Army chief of staff, strongly supported the difficult development and production of the B-29 (grave problems arose, and in anything less than a global conflict, the production assembly lines would have been shut down); they also supported its employment against the Japanese home islands. Both FDR and Marshall were extraordinarily strong advocates of strategic bombing. They constantly put enormous pressure on Arnold to bomb Japan (thus, the genesis of the raid by Lt Col Jimmy Doolittle against Tokyo in early 1942). Roosevelt stated publicly that the Axis powers would be bombed heavily, and he became increasingly appalled over the atrocities and savagery—indeed, the holocaust—being committed by the Japanese Imperial Army in East Asia.[3]

Arnold, who suffered several heart attacks during the war (he was constantly admonished by Marshall to slow down), reacted by tirelessly driving himself and the Air Staff. He believed that the war with Japan presented the AAF with the opportunity finally to prove that a modern nation such as Japan could be driven out of the war without necessitating an invasion.

In Maj Gen Curtis E. LeMay, Arnold found the man he wanted to lead the B-29 strategic campaign against Japan. In early 1945, the campaign had lagged from the Mariana Islands, and Arnold relieved Brig Gen Haywood ("Possum") Hansell in favor of LeMay. General Arnold insisted on results. LeMay was an outstanding bomber tactician; moreover, he was an operator and a hard driver. In the European strategic campaign, he had displayed outstanding leadership.

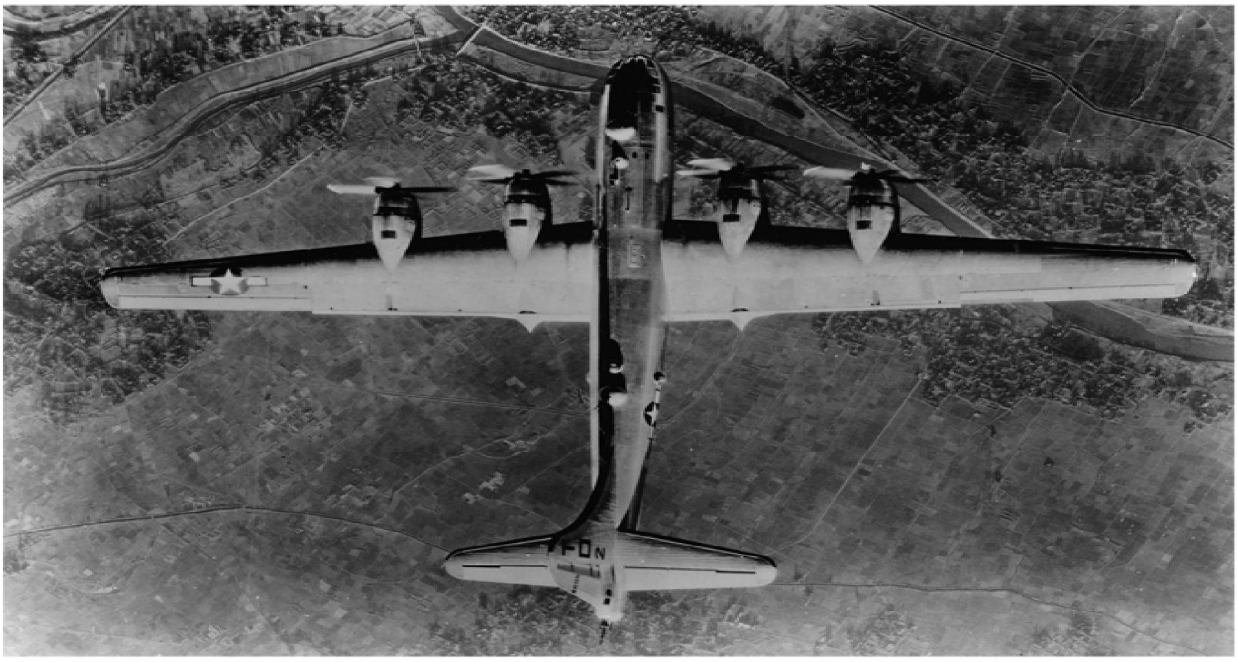
As is well known, LeMay in March 1945 switched from high-altitude, precision bombing to a low-level incendiary campaign that began on 9–10 March 1945 with the incendiary strike on Tokyo—the most destructive bombing attack of World War II. It is important to emphasize that the incendiary attacks against Japanese cities in the spring of 1945 were supported and acclaimed by America's war leadership, starting with President Roosevelt and General Marshall. In late 1944 and early 1945, Roosevelt was increasingly occupied with the Pacific war, extraordinarily knowledgeable about its details and movement, and preoccupied about the potential cost in American lives should an invasion be necessary. He in fact implored Marshall to deliver a decisive blow.

As regards the question of why the AAF's operational bomb commanders in the Pacific had carte blanche in strategy and tactics, the clear answer is this: Both FDR and Truman emphasized very clearly to Marshall and Arnold that everything should be done to end the war with Japan as quickly as possible, with the least loss of American and Allied lives. This fact is the overwhelming, constant thread between Roosevelt and Truman, and it underlies President Truman's decision making between June and August 1945. It cannot be overemphasized.

When Truman called his military chiefs to the White House on 18 June 1945, uppermost in his mind were the mounting American casualties in the Pacific island campaigns. Most revealing of Truman's mindset—and frequently neglected by historians—was Adm William Leahy's memorandum of 14 June calling the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to this meeting. Leahy informed the JCS that Truman wanted

> an estimate of the time required and an estimate of the losses in killed and wounded that will result from an invasion of Japan proper.
>
> He wants an estimate of the time and the losses that will result from an effort to defeat Japan by isolation, blockade, and bombardment by sea and air forces. . . .
>
> It is his intention to make his decisions on the campaign with the purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of American lives.
>
> Economy in the use of time and in money cost is comparatively unimportant.[4]

In the middle of June 1945, Okinawa was the one campaign that Truman had foremost in his mind. It had been a staggeringly bloody campaign that killed or wounded about 49,000 Americans. The ferocity of the Japanese defenders and the stunningly successful Japanese use of kamikaze suicide planes gave Truman



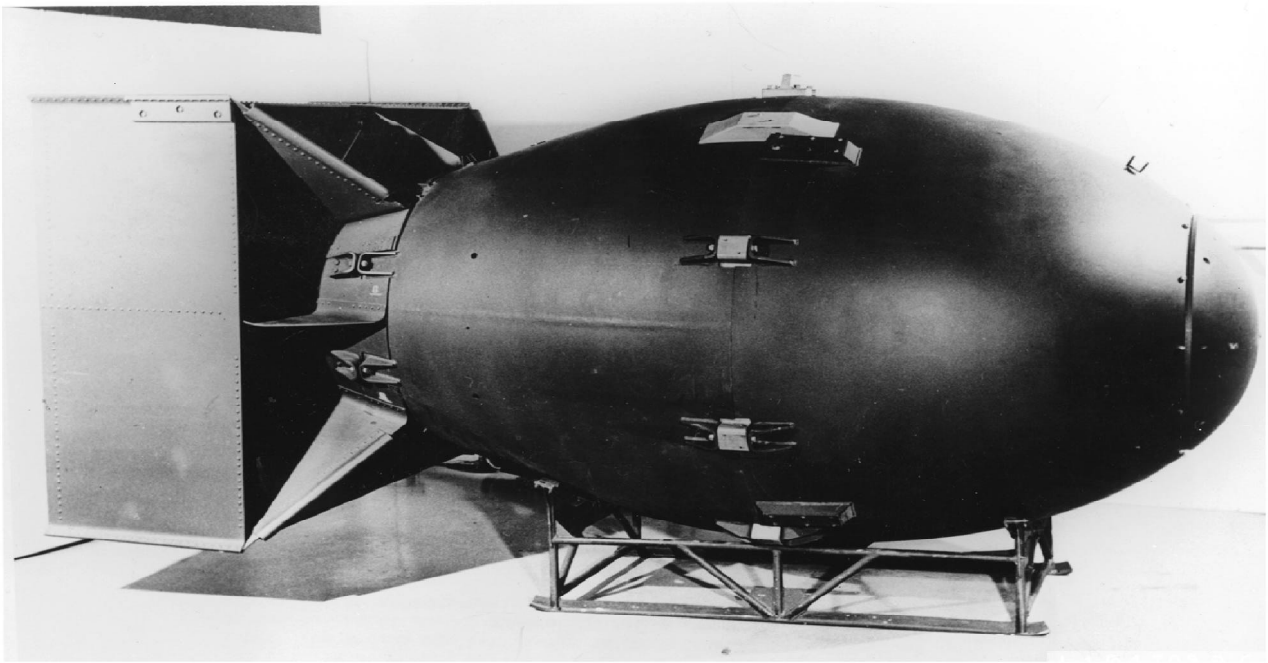
In November 1944, American warplanes began bomb-ing the Japanese mainland from the Marianas Islands using high altitude precision bombing techniques. Later, General LeMay switched to a low level incendiary cam-paign. The B-29 above heads to its target as it crosses the Tama River just west of Tokyo.

and the military leadership pause concerning potential American casualties in an invasion of Kyushu (Operation Olympic), which Truman approved on 18 June for 1 November 1945. Based on the American casualty rate of 35 percent for Okinawa—emphasized to Truman during the meeting of 18 June 1945—the US could suffer approximately 268,000 casualties in a Kyushu invasion, given the size of the invading forces.[5]

Also foreboding to Truman were the facts that some 6,000 to 8,000 kamikaze planes would be available to oppose a Kyushu landing and that the Japanese could count on more than 2 million troops to defend the home islands with great ferocity. Throughout World War II, the US Navy had 34 ships sunk, 368 damaged, 4,907 sailors killed, and 4,824 wounded from kamikaze attacks. For approximately every seven kamikazes encountered, the Navy had a ship sunk or damaged. The fact was that Japanese hard-liners in the military and the government were insisting on a fight to the finish, with the objective of forcing a negotiated peace that would modify or destroy the surrender policy of the Truman administration. They emphasized the losses that the Americans had suffered on Okinawa. The US Army's medical plan for Operation Olympic estimated that total battle and nonbattle casualties (not including dead) could be 394,859.

Also, the reading of Japan's diplomatic traffic by the United States through the so-called Magic intercepts indicated that retention of the emperor was not the only impediment to peace. The Magic traffic indicated that the Japanese were attempting to deal with the Soviet Union to enable them to keep their prewar empire. Moreover, the Imperial Army's high command was calling the tune. American intercepts of Japanese military traffic, code-named Ultra, showed clearly that the Japanese army had no intention of surrendering. In fact, since the meeting of 18 June between Truman and the joint chiefs, Ultra pointed to a large buildup of Japanese troops on Kyushu. This situation lent credence to Truman's admonition to his military chiefs that he wanted to prevent "an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other."[6]

The Japanese failed to accept the Potsdam declaration calling for unconditional surrender, and Truman ordered that the atomic bomb be dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. But Japan did not surrender. Not until a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki and not until the Soviet Union declared war on Japan did the Japanese war council even begin to debate surrender. At a cabinet meeting on 9 August, after word of the Nagasaki strike, Gen Korechika Anami, Japanese minister of war, remarked that "we must fight the war through to the end no matter how great the odds against us!" Senior leaders of the Japanese army and navy argued for a continuation of the war and sought to thwart Emperor Hirohito's efforts to surrender to the Allies. Subsequently, radical hard-liners triggered a brief palace coup that resulted in the death of soldiers loyal to the emperor and of rebellious officers who sought to prevent him from broadcasting a surrender to the Allies. Numerous senior Japanese officers and other officials—including Anami and Vice Adm Takajiro



The Japanese war council did not begin to debate surrender until the second atomic bomb was dropped and the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. The second nuclear weapon, of the "Fat Man" type pictured above, weighed about 10,000 pounds and has a yield equivalent to approximately 20,000 tons of high explosives.

Onishi, father of the kamikaze force—committed harakiri (ritual suicide) rather than surrender. The emperor announced Japan's acceptance of surrender terms on 15 August (Tokyo time). Thereafter, he sent members of his family to key military installations to ensure that militants would not continue the war.

Had the atomic bombs not been used, would Japan have surrendered prior to the invasion of Kyushu, scheduled for 1 November 1945? This answer, of course, cannot be determined. However, had the B-29 campaign continued for several more months, more Japanese would have been killed than at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any other means whereby Japan could have surrendered with casualties equivalent to or less than those experienced at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan had been defeated but was not willing to surrender. The Japanese military and government were, in effect, holding their own people hostage.

Both Hiroshima and Nagasaki were, under the principles of international law, legitimate military targets for attack. Both had extensive armament factories as well as war-related industries, and both contributed significantly to Japanese military transportation networks. Further, both had robust military establishments. Hiroshima, for example, was the headquarters of the Japanese Second Army—virtually destroyed in the atomic bombing of the city. Beyond this rationale, the decision to drop the atomic bomb on both of these targets did not constitute an act of aggression against a foe already reduced to impotence by Allied attack. Indeed, in August 1945, fighting still raged across Asia: an invasion of Malaya was planned for later in the year. In particular, hundreds of thousands of Allied prisoners were in mortal danger. By this time, 43 percent of the prisoners in Japanese hands (almost 400,000 captives) had died—a clear measure of the brutality of Japanese rule overall. (The toll of Japanese rule is approximately 20 million dead.) As recent scholarship has shown, clear evidence exists that, had the Allies invaded, the Japanese would have slaughtered these prisoners of war.[7] Also worthy of note is the fact that Japan had under way a vigorous program to develop an atomic bomb.[8]

It is fashionable to look back from today's perspective and conclude that dropping the atomic bombs was not necessary. President Harry Truman did not possess this luxury. Although militarily defeated, Japan was not willing to surrender. Factions in the military and the government were calling for a fight to the finish, even inviting an invasion and planning to inflict enormous casualties on the American forces. Truman had a responsibility to the military and to the people of the United States to bring the Pacific war to an end and to avoid the enormous casualties that an invasion would have cost.

Had the atomic bombs not been used, would Japan have surrendered prior to the invasion of Kyushu, scheduled for 1 November 1945?

Although revisionist historians like to claim that most American historians question Truman's decision, this statement is far from the truth. Many historians believe—given the context of the time and Truman's options—that the president made the correct decision. Indeed, a survey conducted by the Organization of American Historians showed that of 854 American historians polled, only six thought that dropping the bomb was a "dark spot" in history.[9]

Clearly, had President Roosevelt lived, he would have undoubtedly made the same decision as did Truman. In the context of the time, both men, as commanders in chief, believed that the United States needed to employ strategic bombing against the Axis nations that were slaughtering millions and attempting to destroy democracy. Truman, like FDR before him, believed deeply that the United States should, whenever it was feasible, end the war and save American lives.

Notes

1. Maj Gen H. H. Arnold, chief, Army Air Corps, memorandum to assistant secretary of war, subject: Four-Engine Bombers, 17 October 1940.

2. Gen H. H. Arnold, chief, Army Air Forces, memorandum to Gen George C. Marshall, Army chief of staff, subject: Initial Employment of B-29 Airplanes, ca. May 1943.

3. For a consideration of the development and production of the B-29 and a discussion of President Roosevelt's desire to see Japan bombed, see Carl Berger, *B-29: The Superfortress* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970).

4. Adm William Leahy, chief of staff to President Truman, memorandum to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 14 June 1945. Quoted in Department of Defense, *The Entry of the Soviet Union into the War against Japan: Military Plans, 1941–1945* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1955), 76.

5. For a discussion of expected American casualties in Operations Olympic and Coronet (the invasion of Honshu, scheduled for March 1946), see *Entry of the Soviet Union*, 76–84.

6. Ibid., 84.

7. See Thomas B. Allen and Norman Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan and Why Truman Dropped the Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory: The End of World War II* (New York: Dutton, 1995); and Robert James Maddox, "The Biggest Decision: Why We Had to Drop the Atomic Bomb," *American Heritage* 46, no. 3 (May–June 1995): 71–77.

8. See Robert K. Wilcox, *Japan's Secret War* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1985).

9. "What Do American Historians Think?" *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (December 1994): 1212.

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